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ABSTRACT

An investigation of the circumstances that lead to older adults enrolling in traditional college or university degree programs involved a secondary analysis of data collected as part of a larger study conducted in Fall 1981. The analysis was limited to degree-seeking students at least 35 years of age. Nearly three-fourths of the survey respondents were between 25 and 34 years of age. After age 35, women were much more likely to enroll in a college degree program than were men. Most attended school part-time and had attended a college or technical school prior to their current period of enrollment. Family and job responsibilities were the most frequently cited reasons for delaying the completion of a degree. The reasons for delaying college work varied with age. A significant majority returned to college to improve their job and career opportunities. Adults in the 35 or older category were less likely than the younger adult students to cite "develop a new career" as a goal. While events that trigger an adult to enroll in degree programs were very diverse, circumstances related to job or family account for a significant majority of the reasons cited for returning to school. (YLB)

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NONTRADITIONALS IN A TRADITIONAL SETTING:

WHY OLDER ADULTS RETURN TO COLLEGE

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INTRODUCTION

Background and Perspective

A considerable amount of research on the nontraditional learner has been conducted during the last decade (Cross, 1980). The results of most of these studies reveal the importance of career goals and the impact of job and family responsibilities on the educational pursuits of adult students. Characteristics of the adult learner have also been studied to determine who participates in various types of learning (Cross, 1980; NCES, 1976, 1982). However, the results of these studies have been limited by their broad definitions of what constitutes an adult student and by the fact that demographic characteristics only reveal who participates in higher education; they do not address the issues of when or why older adults make the decision to enroll. For example, two recent studies (Carp, Peterson & Roelfs, 1975; Hendrickson, 1979) reported that the barriers, goals, and demographic characteristics of adults enrolled in college were not significantly different from "interested" adult nonstudents.

Within the past several years researchers have attempted to move beyond the collection of demographic information and questioned adults about the catalyst or event that precipitated their enrollment (Astin, 1976; Aslanian and Brickell, 1980;). None of these studies however, examined older adult students enrolled in a bachelor's degree program as a unique group, leaving the implication that demographic characteristics, motivation to learn, goals, barriers, and precipitating events are the same regardless of the type of organized learning activity in which these adult students are engaged. Moreover, degree seeking students who fall in the 35+ age category have received even less attention in the research literature and have rarely been

compared to the 25-34 year olds who compose the majority of "adult" students.

Major Objectives

Past research, then, has paved the way for a more detailed investigation of the events which cause older adults to enroll in traditional college or university degree programs. This paper addresses three major questions: (1) Are the general demographic characteristics of the older adult student (i.e. age 35+) seeking a college degree similar to those of younger adult students (i.e., between 25-34)? (2) What factors or specific situations influence an older adult to enter or reenter a college degree program? (3) Do triggering events vary with a student's age and corresponding differences in individual life circumstances?

Data Source

The data used in the preparation of this paper represents a secondary analysis of data collected as part of a larger study conducted in the Fall of 1981 (Sewall, 1984). In the original study, a sample of 1343 adult, degree seeking students from six campuses of the University of Wisconsin System were randomly selected for participation. "Adult degree seeking student" was defined as an individual 25 years of age or older. In addition, to be included in the study, the individual had to be a matriculated undergraduate student who had not previously been awarded a bachelor's degree. Specific institutions in the University of Wisconsin System were selected because of the large proportion of adults enrolled in their degree programs and to provide a good mixture of both small and large student bodies (600 to 25,000) serving urban, suburban and rural populations.

Of the original 1343 adult students surveyed, 1007 returned a completed questionnaire for an overall response rate of 75%. Approximately one-quarter (N=249) of the respondents were age 35 and older. The age distribution of

the survey respondents was found to be proportionately similar to the entire adult student population enrolled at the institutions participating in the study.

Method

All data in the original survey were collected through the use of a mailed questionnaire. Because of the limited amount of information available regarding what serves as a catalyst or trigger for enrollment, semi-structured interviews with thirty adult students preceded the survey and provided the basis for the development of the three-page questionnaire. The survey instrument was designed to gather relevant demographic information including the age, sex, marital status, occupational status and educational history of the respondent. Information regarding perceived barriers to earlier completion of a degree program, educational goals and the catalyst or event which directly triggered the respondent's return to school was also collected. The instrument was pilot tested in early Fall 1981. After appropriate modifications were made, the full survey was completed in October and November of 1981.

The original report of results provides a description of the factors which motivate a large group of adult students (age 25 and over) to return to school. Secondary analyses of this data base were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences to determine how students who were at least 35 years or age compared with adult degree seeking students in general.

RESULTS

Characteristics of the Adult Student

Although the present analysis was limited to degree seeking students, the respondents proved to be a highly diverse group that did not easily fit a

demographically homogeneous profile.

Age and Sex. As can be seen in Table 1, nearly three-quarters of the students responding to the survey were between 25 and 34 years of age and nearly two-thirds (62%) of the entire group of respondents were female. The sex distribution of students did, however, vary with age. Within the 25-34 age range the number of females only slightly exceeded the number of males, while among students over 35, female students outnumbered male students nearly 3 to 1.

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents By Age and Sex

Age	Men	Women	Total	%
25-34	279	371	650	(72%)
35-44	51	145	196	(22%)
45+	13	40	53	(6%

Respondents ranged in age from 25 to 69 with a median age of 30. Women tended to be slightly older, with a medium age of 31 for women and 28 for men.

Marital and Family Status. Table 2 provides a percentage distribution of respondents by marital status and age. About two thirds of the questionnaire respondents were married, 21% were single and had never been married, 17% were divorced or separated and 1% were widowed. While the proportion of students

Table 2. Marital Status of Respondents by Age

Marital Status	Age 25-34	35-44	45+	Total
Married	55	80	66	61%
Single	28	3	2	21%
Divorced	16	17	23	17%
Widowed	1	0	9	1%

who were divorced remained approximately the same across the three age

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categories, more students were single in the 25-34 age category than in the older groups. The 35-44 age group contained the largest proportion of married students (80%). Students in the 45+ category were more likely than the younger adults to be divorced or widowed.

Along with the large proportion of students who were married, a comparable number also had children, including 74% who had school-aged children (as shown in Table 3). Nearly all of the students who were at least 35 years of age had children. However, the younger adult students were more likely than the older ones to have preschool children. Specifically, while 60% of the younger adults had preschool children and, as one might expect, only 11% of the students in the 35+ category had children who had not yet entered school.

Table 3. Number of Children of Respondents*

Children	25-34	35-44	45+	Total
Children (any age)	50%	95%	91%	62%
Preschool (5)	60%	11%	0%	38%
School Age (6-18)	66%	77%	60%	74%
Over 18	0%	25%	92%	17%

*Column percentages do not total 100% because they are not mutually exclusive categories.

Employment Status. Given the age distribution, marital status and family responsibilities of the average adult student, it is not surprising that most of the respondents (66%) were employed at the time of the study, including 43%

Table 4. Employment Status

Employment Status	25-34	35-44	45+	Total
Unemployed	21%	17%	15%	20%
Full-time Homemaker	12%	19%	11%	14%
Part-Time	25%	19%	21%	23%
Full-Time	43%	44%	53%	43%

who were employed full time (Table 4). The proportion of adult students in

each of the four employment categories, varied only slightly with age. Approximately half of the students 45 and older worked full time compared to 43% of the younger adults. Approximately one-fifth of the students in each age category considered themselves unemployed at the time of the survey.

Educational Background and Characteristics. The majority of adults who responded to the survey had attended a postsecondary institution prior to their current period of enrollment (see Table 5). Two-thirds attended a

Table 5. Prior Educational Attainment

Educational Level	25-34	35-44	45+	Total
High School graduate	10%	23%	25%	20%
Completed some technical school	10%	11%	10%	10%
Received A.A. degree (technical school)	5%	5%	0%	5%
Attended some college	60%	53%	63%	58%
Received A.A. degree (college)	7%	9%	2%	7%

college or university at some time in the past. An additional 15% had completed technical school courses or earned an associate degree at a technical school. Only 20% of the respondents had had no formal postsecondary educational experience before returning to school as an adult. There were no

Table 6. Length of Time Between High School and College

Length of Time	25-34	35-44	45+	Total
0	35%	23%	26%	32%
1-3 years	20%	9%	18%	18%
4-6 years	15%	6%	0%	12%
7-9 years	15%	3%	4%	12%
10+ years	14%	58%	52%	26%

significant differences in the proportion of older and younger adult students who had attended a postsecondary institution prior to their current period of enrollment.

Respondents were also asked when they first took a college course for credit. One third of the adults (32%) indicated that they had attended college immediately after high school but then dropped out. Another 18% enrolled in college between one and three years after high school graduation but had not completed their degree. Older and younger adult students differed somewhat regarding the length of time between high school and college. Among the younger students more than half had first attended college within three years after high school graduation, while more than half of the adults in the 35+ age category waited ten years or more after high school graduation to attend college.

Enrollment Status. With respect to current educational status, respondents were asked to indicate their present class standing and the number

Table 7. Class Standing By Age

Class Standing	25-34	35-44	45+	Total
Freshman	29%	34%	35%	31%
Sophomore	32%	29%	21%	31%
Junior	20%	18%	25%	20%
Senior	18%	19%	19%	18%

of credits they were currently taking. Among the adults currently enrolled in degree programs, 62% were underclassmen, evenly divided between the freshman and sophomore classes. Twenty percent of the adult students had junior standing, with the remaining 18% at the senior level. An examination of class standing by age reveals that among the older (35+) respondents, a full one-third were freshmen compared to only 29% of the younger adults. Virtually the same percentage of the students were seniors across the three age categories.

Almost two thirds (65%) of the respondents were attending school part time (11 semester credits or less), including 30% of the group who were taking

between 1 and 5 credits. In contrast, 35% indicated they were taking 12 or more hours of course work during the Fall, 1981 semester.

An examination of the number of credits carried and the age of the respondents

Table 8. Number of Semester Hour Credits Taken

Number of Credits	25-34	35-44	45+	Total
0-5	26%	38%	51%	30%
6-8	26%	27%	25%	26%
9-11	10%	9%	9%	10%
12-14	24%	16%	9%	21%
15-17	12%	7%	6%	10%
18+	3%	2%	0%	3%

revealed a moderate relationship between age and number of credits taken, in that students 35 and older tended to take fewer credits. Seventy-four percent of the respondents aged 35-44 years attended school part time and 85% of the adults 45 and over attend school part time.

Summary of Demographic and Educational Characteristics. In examining the demographic characteristics of the adult degree-seeking student we find that nearly three-fourths (72%) are between 25 and 34 years of age. Two-thirds (61%) are married and sixty-two percent have children, including forty-six percent who have school-age children. In addition to their family responsibilities, two-thirds of the students are employed outside the home. Forty-three percent are employed full time and 23% part time. Adult students 35 years of age and older were more likely than the younger adult students to be married and have school age children.

Responses to questionnaire items regarding educational background and present college status revealed that nearly two-thirds (66%) of the entire group had attended college prior to their current period of enrollment. Forty-nine percent had attended college within three years after high school graduation while one-fourth (26%) waited ten years or more before enrolling in

a college or university. It is also interesting to note that fewer older students than younger adults attended college directly after high school.

Although a high percentage of adults had attended college in the past, approximately two-thirds (62%) were underclassmen and only one in five had senior standing. Finally, the prevailing impression that most adults are attending college part time was confirmed by the fact that 65% of the respondents were taking 11 or fewer semester credits at the time of the survey. This pattern of attendance was particularly noteworthy among students who were at least 45 years of age at the time of the survey. More than half of these students were taking five or fewer credits.

WHY DO ADULT STUDENTS WAIT?

In addition to completing the demographic and educational background questions, the adult students were asked to indicate what factors had prevented them from completing a college degree earlier. Respondents were first asked to rate the extent to which the reasons listed in Table 9 were "very much," "a little" or "not at all" responsible for delaying their college enrollment. A second item asked them to indicate "the single most important" reason for not enrolling or completing their degree earlier. Respondents were also encouraged to specify "other" factors which may have prevented them from returning to school and rank them using the same criteria.

Only one barrier, "wanted to or had to work," was rated "very much" responsible for delaying the enrollment of more than 50% of the matriculated adult students. Two additional factors, including "family responsibilities" and "lack of funds," were considered important barriers by at least one-third of the respondents. All three barriers can be considered situational barriers which are "arising from one's situation in life at a given time" (Cross, 1980, p. 106). Dispositional or attitudinal barriers, including lack of interest

and lack of encouragement also prevented a significant number of adults from enrolling in college earlier. Only a small number of adult students cited institutionally related factors such as course schedules, locations, lack of information, etc., as important barriers.

When forced to choose the single most important barrier, more respondents chose family responsibilities than any other reason. Unfortunately, with only 27% of the respondents selecting this barrier, no single factor emerged as "the" reason for delaying college entry. However, when taken together, the situational barriers of family responsibilities, work responsibilities and

Table 9. Reasons for Delaying College Entry

Barrier	Very Much	Most Important*
Wanted to/Had to Work	58%	20%
Family Responsibilities	47%	27%
Funds Not Available	37%	12%
Lack of Interest	24%	17%
Lack of Encouragement	19%	6%
Attended Technical School	16%	3%
Military Service	14%	5%
Lack of Information	11%	3%
Illness	6%	2%
Other		6%

*Column may not total 100% due to rounding.

cost account for over half (59%) of the most important barriers. By adding "lack of interest" to the list, the primary reason for delaying completion of a college degree can be explained for three-fourths of the respondents.

In addition to the barriers listed, approximately 9% (N=86) of the respondents listed other reasons for delaying their college work. The bulk of these responses (N=39) were general attitudinal factors including lack of a specific goal, lack of confidence and immaturity. Institutional factors such as location, poor class schedules or lack of a specific program also accounted for a large number of the "other" responses. The remaining reasons offered by survey respondents ranged from not being able to speak English to having bad

experiences in college several years earlier.

Barriers and Age

The reasons respondents gave for delaying their college work did vary with age (see Table 10). Older adult students (35+ years old) were much more likely than younger adults (25-34) to perceive family responsibilities as a barrier. In fact, with 70% of the post-35 group considering it "very much" a factor and 44% selecting it as the 'single most important" factor, family responsibilities account for a substantial proportion of the reasons for delay. Younger students were most likely to choose work responsibilities, family responsibilities and lack of interest as the most important barriers.

Table 10. Reasons for Delaying Entry by Age

Barrier	% Checking Very Much		% Checking Most Important*	
	25-34	35+	25-34	35+
Wanted to/had to work	57	61	23	15[a]
Family responsibilities	38	70[b]	20	44[b]
Funds not available	35	40	11	11
Lack of interest	28	17[b]	19	11[a]
Lack of encouragement	17	22	5	6
Attended tech school	15	15	4	2
Military service	15	10	5	2
Lack of information	11	13	3	1
Illness	6	6	2	1
Other			6	6

[a]Difference significant at $p \leq .01$ level.
[b]Difference significant at $p \leq .001$ level.
*May not total 100% due to rounding.

Summary of Barriers to Earlier Enrollment. Results of the survey indicate that situational barriers including job and family responsibilities deterred the largest number of adult students from completing their degree earlier. In addition, lack of interest and the availability of funds also emerged as a significant barrier to degree completion. For adult students between the ages of 25 and 34 no single factor emerged as "the" reason for delay; however, taken together, nearly two-thirds of the respondents checked job and family

responsibilities and lack of interest as the major barrier. Among students 35 and older, family responsibilities clearly emerged as the major reason for not enrolling in college earlier.

WHY DO ADULTS ENROLL IN COLLEGE DEGREE PROGRAMS?

Goals of Survey Respondents

The two step approach used to gather information about barriers was also used to determine why adult students are interested in obtaining a college degree. Survey respondents were asked to indicate their reasons for pursuing a degree at the present time by rating the importance (i.e. "very important", "somewhat important", or "not important") of the seven goals listed in Table 13. They were then asked to indicate the "most important" reason for returning to school and also given the option to specify additional goals they thought were important. Cyril Houle (1961) provides a classification system which places an adult's motivation to learn into three basic categories. The first category, the goal-oriented, refers to those individuals who continue their education in order to accomplish a fairly clear-cut objective. The second group encompasses activity-oriented learners who continue their education to broaden their social contacts and enhance their relationships with others. The third category, the learning-oriented, includes those adults who return to school because they enjoy learning and seek knowledge for its own sake.

When asked to rate the importance of various goals, a majority of adults felt that a very important reason for enrolling in a college degree program was "to develop a new career" (65%), "simply to learn" (61%) and "to have the satisfaction of having a degree" (51%). In addition, 48% indicated that a very important goal was "to achieve independence and a sense of identity," while one-third (34%) indicated that "career advancement" was a very important

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reason for continuing their education at the postsecondary level. Clearly, the goal-oriented and learning-oriented motivations are the major reasons adults enroll in a degree program. Activity-oriented goals did not emerge as a significant reason for pursuing a degree.

Table 11. Percentage Distribution of Responses
Reasons for Enrolling in College

Reasons for Enrolling	Very Important	Most Important*
To develop a new career	65	38
Simply to learn	61	17
To have satisfaction of having degree	51	11
To achieve independence and sense of identity	48	14
To advance in present career	34	15
To make contact with other people	17	0
To get away from the daily routine	14	0
Other		5

*May not total 100% due to rounding.

When forced to choose the single most important reason for continuing their education, however, goal-oriented reasons were more likely to be selected than learning-oriented responses such as "simply to learn," and "to have the satisfaction of having a degree." The desire to develop a new career or advance in a current one was selected by over half (53%) of the respondents as their major goals. Another 14% chose "achieving independence and a sense of identity" which also reflects a strong goal orientation. Either "simply to learn" and "the satisfaction of having a degree" was the primary goal of twenty-eight percent of the adult students, while less than one percent of the respondents indicated that their major reason for returning was activity-oriented (getting away from routine, to make contact with people).

Approximately 5% of the respondents listed "other" reasons for returning to school. A content analysis of these responses yielded two major categories. The first category included reasons which roughly fall into Houle's goal-oriented category and appear to be very closely related to the

career-related goals specifically stated in the question. Examples include, "better income," "financial independence," "collect GI Bill" and "develop means to support a "family." A second group of goals which emerged can be categorized as learning-oriented goals including "keep my mind active," "gain confidence" and "utilize my potential."

Goals and Age of Respondents

The percentage of adult learners who felt that development of a new career and achieving independence was very important was lower for respondents in the 35+ age category than for students in the 25-34 age group. However, a higher

Table 12. Reasons for Enrolling and Age of Respondents

Reasons for Enrolling	% Very Important		% Most Important*	
	25-34	35+	25-34	35+
To develop a new career	68	57[a]	42	29[b]
Simply to learn	60	61	15	21
To have satisfaction of degree	48	56	10	14
To achieve independence and sense of identity	52	44	14	17
To advance in present career	34	35	14	16
To make contact with people	16	20	0	0
To get away from routine of daily living	14	15	1	0
Other			3	4

[a]Difference significant at $p \leq .01$ level.
[b]Difference significant at $p \leq .001$ level.
*May not total 100% due to rounding.

proportion of the older learners cited the satisfaction of having a degree as a very important reason for returning to school. The idea of learning for the sake of learning was checked by almost two-thirds of both groups as a "very important" reason for seeking a degree. Career advancement was also equally important to both older and younger adult students.

When forced to choose a single goal, career development and advancement emerged as the most important goal for 57% of the younger adult group. In

fact, the development of a new career was the only goal which was significantly higher for the younger group of adult students. Older adult students appear to be a more diverse group in that their primary reasons for learning were much more evenly distributed across the five goal-oriented and learning-oriented reasons listed.

Summary of Reasons for Pursuing a College Degree

The picture that emerges from the results of the "goals" question is that adult students by and large are seeking a degree to improve and expand their career opportunities. Although other, more socially acceptable, or what Houle calls learning-oriented motivations for seeking a degree are also deemed very important by the matriculated adult, when asked to state their primary reason for seeking a degree nearly three-fourths indicate that they want to get a new job, achieve independence or advance in their present career. Crosstabulation of goals by age indicates that older adult students were a much more diverse group with significantly fewer students developing a new career when compared to the younger group.

WHAT TRIGGERS ADULT PARTICIPATION IN A DEGREE PROGRAM?

The survey was concluded by asking the respondents to indicate what events precipitated their decision to return to school at the present time. The events or "triggers" specified in the questions (and listed in Table 13) were based on the interviews completed prior to the development of the mailed questionnaire. Once again, respondents were asked to rate the extent to which each event influenced their decision (i.e., "very much," "A little," "not at all") as well as selecting the primary trigger or single most important reason for returning to school. The option of citing other triggers was also provided.

The percentage distribution of responses to the question of what triggers

adults to return to school differs remarkably from the results of the "barriers" and "goals" question in two ways. First, while the total number of

Table 13. Percentage Distribution of Responses Triggers to Participation in College

Triggers	Very Much	Most Important*
Dissatisfied with job	34	27
Encouragement from family, friends, etc.	31	12
Funds became available	28	11
Obtained specific information	18	6
Children entered school	14	8
Moved to community	12	4
Family or marital problems	9	4
Lost job	6	3
Serious illness, accident	4	3
Other		22

*May not total 100% due to rounding.

adults responding to these questions was virtually the same as in earlier questions, no single triggering event was considered "very much" a factor by more than one-third of the respondents. For example, becoming dissatisfied with one's job was deemed very much a factor by only 34% of the adults, while encouragement from others (31%) and the availability of funds (28%) were the second and third most frequently cited triggers.

A second notable difference in how adults responded to the "trigger" question as compared to the others is the surprising number of adults who took the time to stipulate "other" triggering events. In fact, because the events listed in the "other" category were also frequently cited as the single most important precipitating event, only job dissatisfaction was selected by a larger number of adults as the primary trigger.

In spite of the fact that no single factor emerged as "the" trigger, collapsing the entire list of triggers into five general categories indicates that 30% of the respondents cited job or career related factors (i.e.

dissatisfied with job, lost job) as the most important trigger, 24% indicated that factors related to one's family (i.e. children entered school, family or marital problems, encouragement) was the most important reason, 11% were triggered by the availability of funds and 6% obtained some specific information and then enrolled. The remaining respondents were triggered by a serious illness, accident, moving to the community or "other" triggers.

Other Triggers Specified by Respondents

Although there were 213 additional triggers specified, an effort was made to identify major themes by using a content analysis technique. The analysis yielded two major categories which accounted for about 70% of the responses. The first was a realization that a college degree was necessary to achieve a personal goal (N=101). Examples of triggers which fell in this category include "a realization of what I wanted to do in life," "found a field that interested me," "made a decision about goals for the future," "finally decided what I wanted to do" and "I realized how badly I wanted to experience education."

The second major category included factors related to a specific campus (N=49). For example, a number of respondents indicated that the location, size and cost of attending a particular UW campus strongly influenced their decision to enroll. Others provided more elaborate explanations like "my husband went to UW-(name of institution) and highly recommended the school to me" or "I would lose credits if I transferred to another campus." It is interesting to note that, although these factors are not "triggers" in the same sense as the other events listed, almost 5% felt that the institutional characteristics were significant enough to make a specific note of them.

Age and Triggering Events

Comparing the triggering events of younger (25-34) and older (35+) adult

students also yields some interesting results. The proportion of younger students who indicated that job dissatisfaction was either "very much" or the "most important" factor in their decision to return to school was significantly higher than for older students. Older students, on the other hand, were more likely to cite children entering school and obtaining information as "very much" a factor. Older adult students, who were more

Table 14. Triggering Events and Age of Respondents

Triggers	% Checked Very Much		% Checked Most Important*	
	25-34	35+	25-34	35+
Dissatisfied with job	38	22[b]	30	19[b]
Received encouragement	31	33	12	14
Funds became available	27	30	12	7
Obtained information	16	22[a]	6	6
Children entered school	9	27[b]	5	15[b]
Moved to community	13	10	5	3
Family or marital problems	8	10	4	6
Lost job	7	6	3	2
Serious illness, death	3	8	2	5

[a]Differences between groups on these items are significant at .05 level.
[b]Difference significant at .01 level.
*May not total 100% due to rounding.

likely to have children, were also much more likely than their younger counterparts to select "children entering school" as the most important factor.

Summary of Triggers to Adult Participation in College Degree Programs. To summarize, approximately, one in four adult students (27%) cited "job dissatisfaction" as the most important trigger in their decision to enroll in a college degree program. Four additional factors were considered most important by at least ten percent of the entire group including (1) received encouragement from family, friends, etc. (12%), (2) funds became available (11%), (3) children entered school (11%) and (4) a realization that a college degree was necessary to achieve a personal goal (10%). Additional triggering events such as obtaining information and family or marital problems were

considered most important by six percent and seven percent of the total group. Loss of job, moving to the community and serious illness were mentioned by three percent of the survey respondents. Younger adults (25-34 years of age) were more likely to view job dissatisfaction as a trigger while a higher percentage of older adults (35+ years old) considered obtaining information and children entering school as very important factors.

COMPARISON OF RESULTS WITH PREVIOUS STUDIES

The large number of state and national studies completed over the past 15 years (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Carp, et. al. 1975; Cross, 1980; Johnstone & Rivera, 1966; National Center for Education Statistics 1972, 1976, 1982) have produced a fairly consistent demographic profile of the adult learner. In many ways, the present study, which was limited to adult degree seeking students yielded similar results. Like previous studies, prior participation in some form of postsecondary education was found to be strongly evident among the adult students seeking a degree. This supports the well founded conclusion (Anderson and Darkenwald, 1979; Cross, 1980; National Center for Education Statistics, 1982) that the most powerful predictor of participation in adult education is the amount of formal schooling an individual has completed.

Studies of large heterogeneous groups of adult students (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Carp, et. al. 1975; National Center for Education Statistics, 1982) have also found that the significant majority of adult learners are engaged in educational activities on a part time basis. This pattern of attendance is also indicative of adult degree seekers, particularly those over the age of 45. In this group 84% are attending school part time. Finally, regardless of the type of formal learning activity being pursued, it appears that the goal of the adult learner is to improve their job status and/or to

improve their general knowledge in a specific area.

Despite the large number of similarities between adults seeking a bachelors degree and the broader group of adult learners some important differences also emerged. For example, studies of the general population of adult learners indicate that nearly equal proportions of men and women are engaged in formal learning activities and that there is a relationship between age and participation in educational activities (Aslanian & Brickell, NCES, 1982). Data analysed by Anderson and Darkenwald (1979), Charner (1980) and Cross (1980) reveal that about one half to three-quarters of the adult education participants are over 35. In the present study, however, 72% of the adult degree seekers were between 25-34 years of age, and in the 35+ age category women outnumbered men three to one.

The employment status of adult degree-seeking students also differed from previously reported studies of adults engaged in organized learning. First, fewer degree seekers were employed full-time, and substantially more were unemployed or otherwise not part of the labor force. Secondly, the marital status of degree seekers also differed from that of nondegree seeking adult students: fewer were married and significantly more were single, divorced or separated. Finally, among adult learners in the 35+ age category, degree seeking students are much more likely to be women, divorced and not employed outside the home when compared to individuals engaged nondegree learning activities.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Although a concerted effort was made to limit the scope of the study and the type of adult learner surveyed, summarizing of these survey rresults still proved to be difficult. Adult degree seekers, like adult learners in general, enter or reenter college degree programs with a varying amounts of job and

family responsibilities. Their previous postsecondary educational experiences have also varied, along with the reasons they give for not finishing college earlier. Reasons for returning range from wanting contact with people to getting a new job, and, not surprisingly, the catalyst or event which triggers their return also varied considerably for the adult student.

The eight statements below provide a brief summary of the major conclusions drawn from this study. Each statement is supplemented by a brief narrative describing the statement in some detail. The list is not by any means intended to be exhaustive and there was no attempt to place them in any order of importance.

1. In general, college degree programs attract adults who are between 25-34 years of age.

The fact that nearly three-fourths of the survey respondents fell within this age range may reflect what Levinson (1974) calls the "age 30 transition." For many people this is a period of time during which they are reexamining their goals in life. Consequently they may have decided to either change occupations completely or increase their efforts to advance in their present job. This finding is also consistent with other demographic studies which have found a relatiohship between age and participation in educational activities. However, in general, adult degree seekers appear to be younger than adults who participate in educational activities which do not necessarily lead to an undergraduate degree.

2. After age 35, women are much more likely to enroll in a college degree program than are men.

During the past decade women have been enrolling in college in ever increasing numbers. In 1980, among college students 35 years and over, women outnumbered men 2 to 1 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981). In the present

study, which was limited to undergraduate matriculants, women outnumbered men 3 to 1 in the 35+ age category. Results from the present study suggest that this significant difference in the proportion of men and women is probably due to the fact that women in general feel a great deal of responsibility toward their families. Consequently, the time of self-examination and the establishment of long term goals, for many women, comes somewhat later in life than it does for men. With the trend toward smaller families, women in their mid 30s and early 40s find that a great deal of free times lies ahead. Family responsibilities have decreased, their children are off to school and they are beginning to develop a number of interests outside of the homemaker role. Some women reported that they returned to school out of necessity because they needed to support themselves and their families while others wanted the security which comes with a college degree and a well paying job should they lose their husband's income in the future.

3. A significant majority of adult degree seekers must cope with job and family responsibilities in addition to attending school. Consequently, these factors play an important role in the adult student's decision to delay college entry and frequently trigger their return.

In general, nearly two-thirds of the students surveyed were married and had children. In the 35+ age category essentially all of the adult students had children and women were more likely to be to be divorced. Forty-three percent of the adults had full-time jobs and 23% were employed part time. Men had more time consuming job responsibilities in that 60% of the men compared to 30% of the women were employed full time. These finding suggest that the adult degree seeking student must significantly adjust their lifestyle to accommodate the role as the student. Many of the adults have school age children and although they may have more free time during the day to attend classes they still must cope with the pressures of managing a household and

finding the time to study and complete class assignments. Consequently, a considerable amount of support from a spouse, children, friend or other significant person is probably essential for continued participation.

4. Most adult degree seekers attend school part time and have attended a college or technical school prior to their current period of enrollment.

This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies and reinforces the fact that adults have responsibilities and interests which extend beyond the educational setting. Two-thirds are attending school part time (11 credits or less) and 62% had either Freshman or Sophomore standing at the time of the survey. When prior education and present educational status is compared across age very few differences between groups emerge. However, there is a tendency for adult students in the post- 45 year old category to attend school part time more often than younger adults.

A significant majority (81%) of the returning adult students also had some prior educational experience at the postsecondary level. Results from the survey indicate that most adults have either been to college at some time in the past or considered enrolling in college for some time. Generally speaking, it appears that individuals who return to school after age 25 are in the midst of reevaluating their lives and establishing new priorities. For example, one student reported, "I always wanted to attend college and get a degree in accounting and now that my family responsibilities are lessened I can do it." Another student stated, "Although I always intended to return to school some day, I kept delaying my return due to career opportunities. Last spring frustration with my job convinced me that it is time to finish my degree."

5. Among degree seeking adults, family and job responsibilities are the most frequently cited reasons for delaying the completion of their degree. The older the adult student, the more likely they were to cite family responsibilities as a barrier.

Results from the present study strongly support the contention that responsibilities associated with an adult's job and family have a direct impact on whether or not an adult returns to college to complete a degree. Returning to college requires a reallocation of time and money which has a direct impact on the "significant others" in an adult's life. The long-term benefits of having a degree must be weighed against the short-term negative effects of being a student. Will I have enough time to spend with my family? What will we have to give up in order to pay tuition? Will I and/or my family be able to "get by" if I quit my job or reduce the number of hours I work? Unlike "traditional" students who complete their degrees at age 21 or 22, most returning adults had previously given job and family a higher priority than education. New priorities needed to be established before they could make the decision to return to school.

6. A significant majority of the adults who return to college do so to improve their job and career opportunities. However, the goals of adults in the 35+ category are less likely than the younger adult students to cite "develop a new career" as a goal.

The goal of improving career opportunities which in turn will lead to a more satisfying, higher paying job is perhaps the most frequently occurring theme to emerge from the questionnaire. Although adults report that other goals such as "simply to learn" and "to have the satisfaction of having a degree" are also very important, when forced to choose, a significant majority of adults cite a career related goal as their primary one. Results from the multiple choice questions regarding goals are strongly reinforced by many of the additional comments volunteered by the survey respondents. One woman wrote, "At age 18 I married. Then I became very busying raising eight children. At age 41 I decided to return to school. I was then working as a nurse's aide and loved my job, but my husband was ill, and I wanted a career

to fall back on if he could no longer work." Other students were more concise stating, "My goal is to be self-supporting but in a job I am interested in," "I feel that getting my degree in nursing is my best change for mobility" and "I am working in a job that I like very much but can't expand without education." A majority of students in the 35+ category indicated that developing a new career was a very important goal. However, a larger percentage of this group also indicated that the satisfaction of having a degree was also a very important goal.

7. Finally, while the events which trigger an adult to enroll in degree programs are very diverse, circumstances related to an individual's job or family account for a significant majority of the reasons cited for returning to school.

An analysis of the responses to the objective portion of the survey indicates that over half of the respondents were triggered by either job dissatisfaction of changes in their family situation. Specifically, 30% cited job related factors such as job dissatisfaction and loss of job or change in family responsibilities as the primary triggering event. Comments offered on the free response portion of the survey further reinforces the fact that changes in the adult's job and family situation triggered a return. Some typical comments include, "I always wanted to finish school when my children were all in school, when they all went to school I decided to go" and "After six years of being a secretary I was very dissatisfied and felt the need for a big change." A comparison of older and younger adults revealed that job dissatisfaction was more likely to trigger the younger adults while a change in family responsibilities, specifically children entering school, was more likely to trigger the older adult student.

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